

Interpretation of Female Alienation in "To Room Nineteen" from Socialist Feminism

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Abstract

Doris Lessing's "To Room Nineteen" embodies the awakening and resistance of female consciousness under the capitalist patriarchal system, reflecting characteristics of the times. This paper intends to interpret the short story from the perspective of socialist feminism, based on Susan's alienation after marriage discussing the change of the role and status of heroine, analyzing the reason of her changes and tragedy, pointing out that alienation is caused by sexual division of labor. It is necessary for women to maintain material and women independence if they desire to achieve fundamental liberation and awake self-consciousness with courage to break male hegemony.

Keywords

Doris Lessing; "To Room Nineteen"; Socialist Feminism; Capitalist Patriarchal System; Female Alienation.

1. Introduction

As one of the most important contemporary British women writers, Doris Lessing won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2007 with "Golden Notes", which established her position in the western literary world. Lessing is not only a prolific writer. His works also involve a variety of genres, including prose, poetry, plays and so on. His themes cover rich content, including striving for national independence, the plight of modern women, the crisis faced by mankind and so on. Lessing's works can reflect social problems and arouse readers' profound thinking. "To Room Nineteen" is Lessing's short story, which is included in "A Man and Two Women". Lessing's novel reflects her concern for women's living conditions, reflects her thinking on women's status, and gives readers some enlightenment.

"To Room Nineteen" tells the story of a couple Susan and Matthew Rowling's "rational" marriage, but this eventually led to the tragedy that the heroine Susan committed suicide. To outsiders, the combination of Susan and Matthew can be said to be "a match made in heaven". After the marriage, the two had their own house, and Susan gave birth to 4 lively and lovely children for Matthew, while Matthew worked hard to maintain the family's life. But the seemingly "happy" life is full of perils. Susan, who became a housewife after marriage, lost her freedom. She was filled with trivial matters of life every day, and she was surrounded by children all day long. She had no source of income and no time of her own. Susan began to become anxious and wanted to change this situation, so she rented a room in a hotel near her home, where she could find her own world. But with her husband's suspicion and suspicion, her freedom gradually disintegrated, so she chose to commit suicide.

In the patriarchal society, women's status has always been oppressed, and people seem to have acquiesced that this is the case with women. In western capital society, women have no economic status and are at the bottom of society. This paper interprets the text from the perspective of socialist feminism, analyzes the reasons for Susan's alienation, and points out the ways for women to achieve fundamental liberation.

2. Overview of Socialist Feminism

Socialist feminism came into being in the second wave of women's rights movement in 1960s and 1970s, based on a large number of predecessors' experiences, and had a lot of intersections with other schools of feminism. There is no clear record of the emergence time of the Socialist Feminist school in historical books. The academic circles agree that this school is marked by the book "Women: The Longest Revolution" published by Juliet Mitchell in 1966. Socialist feminism sublates the traditional feminist thought and constantly forms its own viewpoint. This school explores the reasons why women are oppressed from the perspective of dualism, that is, capitalism and patriarchy, and holds that the low status of women is the result of both.

As one of the representatives of socialist feminism, Alison Jagger's idea of "female alienation" has become an important part of this school. She believes that "female alienation provides a theoretical framework for socialist feminism to systematically analyze the oppression of contemporary women". (Alison Jagger, 2009:452). Jagger divided the phenomenon of female alienation into three aspects based on Marxist alienated labor theory, namely, sexual alienation, maternal alienation and universal alienation. Through the analysis of alienation, Jagger believes that "the alienation of women in contemporary society is the product of specific history under capitalist mode of production". (470) capitalism and patriarchy are a whole, which contributes to the causes of women's oppression. Therefore, she believes that if women want to change the state of oppression, they should improve women's consciousness, pay attention to women's labor and eliminate women's poverty.

3. Susan's Alienation

Simone de Beauvoir said in "Secondary" that "women are not born, but acquired". (Simonne de Beauvoir, 2011: 9). Therefore, the position of women in society is determined by social ideology. Susan, the heroine of "To Room Nineteen", also embodies this point.

3.1. Alienation of the Division of Labor

Susan, the heroine of "To Room Nineteen", chose to give up her job after getting married, and focused on taking care of her family. As the narrator said in the novel, "Susan didn't go out to work and cause various problems like other women to show independence. Both husband and wife believe that children need the care of their mothers when they are young." (Lesing, 1998:90). In the western capitalist society, because of the dissimilation of gender relations, especially reflected in the division of gender labor, men work hard to earn money outside, forcing women to return to their families after marriage, which has become the consensus of all of us. However, this has caused women to lose their economic status and depend on men economically, which has led to women losing their freedom in many aspects.

The word "reason" appeared many times in the novel, which was also caused by the social ideology at that time. For example, the marriage for Mr. and Mrs. Rowling is based on reason. (87) When Susan learned that her husband had an affair and had a relationship with another woman outside, Susan chose "reason" to think about the problem and thought it was not unforgivable. As there is a passage in the novel: "her reason tells herself that everything is OK. Even if Matthew does steal an affair occasionally in the afternoon, so what? She knows very well that except that she occasionally feels lonely, they really get along well, and extramarital affairs are not important." (93) In fact, "reason" is just an excuse for Susan to comfort herself. Even if Susan wants to question and resist, it is in vain. In the capitalist society at that time, even if women knew that their husbands were having an affair outside, they could only keep silent. Because women don't have their own financial resources, since they want to be attached to their husbands, they need to listen to their husbands.

3.2. Alienation of Mental Intelligence

Jagger believes that the alienation of women's spiritual intelligence in capitalist society is that they dare not express their views in public and seldom participate in the process of cultural creation, which leads to their being derogated from in cultural works. At the same time, women's participation in scientific research is far lower than that of men.

In "To Room Nineteen", Susan had a decent job before marriage and was able to have fun at work. However, after marriage, Susan decided to give up her job, and her role changed accordingly. She was no longer herself, but Matthew's wife and mother of four. These changes bring anxiety to Susan, because she can't be herself again. As a result, Susan was constantly tortured by the "devil" in her heart, which made her afraid and uneasy. In the novel, there is a description like this: "But deep down, there is something yelling, screaming impatiently and unhappy, and she is scared." One day, she really saw him. She stood at the end of the garden, watching the tide recede. She looked up and saw this person, or this thing, sitting on a white stone chair. " (93) In fact, the "devil" in Susan's heart and the "people" she sees are the externalization of Susan's repressed heart.

Capitalist society not only makes women lose their economic status, but also destroys women's psychology. What makes Susan even more miserable is that when she tells her husband about her situation and pain, she gets her husband's incomprehension and suspicion. The "rational" husband even asks Susan if she wants to divorce him. This is also the true portrayal of the devastation brought by capitalist economy to women's psychology at that time.

3.3. Alienation of Femininity

Patriarchal system, which emerged from the patriarchal clan, has continued to this day, and the idea of dualistic opposition between men and women is deeply rooted in people's ideas. The formed ideas of "taking husband as the heaven" and "men outside and women inside" have become an ideology, which restricts women's development. This concept has become an invisible norm that restricts women and makes women in an unequal position. It affects women's own values. Even as far as women themselves are concerned, many people believe in these views and gradually lose their sense of self-independence. (Li Fei, 2018: 51). Therefore, in "To Room Nineteen", Susan may have accepted this change of role and status silently. Maybe she thinks that her husband should return to his family in order to maintain his family and work hard. Therefore, patriarchal society sometimes makes women mentally insensitive and admits that their status should be lower than that of men.

There is a close cooperative relationship between patriarchy and capitalism. In order to protect their parental privileges, men use the capitalist system to strengthen restrictions on women's rights, so that they can obey and rely on men economically. (Zhang Lina, 2009: 17). This is the double oppression of women's body and mind, which means that women have to rely on men in terms of economy and spirit, lose freedom and have no freedom.

Margaret Drabble, a contemporary British writer, once compared Doris Lessing to Cassandra, a prophetess in ancient Greek mythology. Shavolta also believed that Lessing was sensitive to the social climate like a barometer. Lessing paid more attention to the influence of patriarchal society on women's psychological level, and accurately captured the destruction of social ideology on women's hearts at that time.

4. Susan's Awakening and Resistance

Once women lose their self-awareness, they will become the spiritual shackles of modern women's development. They will imprison their independent personality without using other people's words, be assimilated by the "female image that should exist" in people's mouth, and be in a dependent position in family and society. (Li Fei, 2018: 51). The heroine of "To Room

Nineteen" has been using "reason" to numb herself, but long-term depression has caused Susan to become more and more anxious, so she has to find her own world and spiritual sustenance.

4.1. Find Your Own World

In the novel, the marriage between Susan and Matthew seems to be perfect, but in fact it is at the expense of Susan's freedom. Nothing in their beautiful house belongs to Susan. Faced with a life filled with trivial matters, Susan wants to find a free world for herself. So Susan set an empty room at home as her own room. However, the good times didn't last long. Susan took her clothes to the room. From then on, the room became a public place for the family. Lessing's plot arrangement is similar to Virginia Woolf's "A Room of One's Own". Woolf believes that to achieve economic independence, women "need a room with a lock on the door". (129) But the territory of this family didn't give her a break, and staying in it made Susan feel more closed. And "Mom's room" was constantly disturbed by children and servants, and Susan's restlessness began to invade her again. (Cen Liangjuan, 2011: 82). The invasion of emptiness and anxiety again and again made Susan turn her hope to the outside world.

There is a passage in the novel: "she told Matthew that she must take a vacation, and he agreed. This is not the same as before. They used to lie in bed and discuss problems in each other's arms. She knew that he finally diagnosed that she was unreasonable." (107) From this description, we can see that Matthew doesn't understand Susan's anxiety, but thinks that Susan is making trouble without reason. Even if Matthew later agreed to Susan's vacation, her life was still filled with family chores, so it can be said that even when Susan was alone, she didn't find her own time.

4.2. Looking for One's Spiritual Sustenance

Lessing once commented on this novel: "I like 'To Room Nineteen', which is a depressing work. The people inside have everything, are smart, have a good education, have a house and beautiful and lovely children. They should have no worries, but they keep thinking about such a question 'What to live for' ".(Roy Newquist, 1964: 198) The dual repression of capitalism and patriarchy made Susan constantly lose herself and her soul.

Room 19 in the novel is Susan's last spiritual sustenance. Room 19 was a hotel room near Susan's house, and Susan would visit every once in a while for a few hours. Because here she found herself. What is she doing in the room? Nothing was done. When she had sat down enough, she stood up from her chair, walked to the window, stretched out, looked out with a smile on her face, and cherished this life of anonymity. She is no longer Susan Rowling, the mother of four children, Matthew's wife, the mistress of Mrs White and Sophie. (112) this room 19 is like Susan's own heart habitat. Even if she doesn't do anything, it won't make her feel empty, which is in sharp contrast to her state at home.

However, it didn't last long, because Matthew suspected whether she was cheating and secretly followed Susan. Her husband has found her whereabouts, the world has found her whereabouts, and the pressure is on her. (116) Susan's own space does not deserve to exist. She can no longer find her own space. There are only two choices left to Susan, either continue to return to the previous family life, or choose to die. Obviously, Susan chose the latter. But death does not represent Susan's cowardice, but a way she chooses to resist. She would rather end her life than return to her previous state. The root cause of Susan's suicide is the destruction of women by capitalist patriarchy.

5. Conclusion

"To Room Nineteen" , the heroine Susan's transformation from alienation to suicide after marriage reflects the oppression of capitalist patriarchy on women. Capitalist patriarchy not only limits women's freedom but also imprisons women's spiritual world. On the one hand, in a

capitalist society, women have no source of income and need to depend on men in terms of money, which makes women lose their right to speak. At the same time, married women have to return to the family, which limits women's freedom and makes it difficult to have their own world. On the other hand, the ideology of capitalist patriarchy paralyzes people's thoughts, and the ideology of patriarchy remains in people's consciousness, even women think it should be. Therefore, two improvements are needed to change this situation. First of all, women should ensure their economic independence. Only in this way can they get rid of their subordination and dependence on men. Secondly, women should be clearly aware of the impact of patriarchal society on people's thinking, should see their position in society, and be ideologically independent of men, which also has certain enlightening significance for women in today's society.

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